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Late night television and the comedy crisis

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Jan. 13, 2010 NCR Today

When the hour-long primetime "The Jay Leno Show" (NBC weeknights 10 p.m. Eastern and Pacific) premiered last Fall, I watched the first five programs and a few here and there afterward. I was so unimpressed that I called the show "dull and disappointing" in my brief review in the January 2010 issue [1] of St. Anthony Messenger.

If it was evident to me in those first five shows, why wasn't anyone at NBC paying attention? Because Jay Leno is a golden goose, and they thought he would keep laying golden eggs no matter what. Alas.

While with my family over Thanksgiving, I talked about the show and one of my sisters agreed with me but said she watched it for the "Headlines" and "Jay Walking" segments Jay brought with him from his many years as Johnny Carson's successor on "The Tonight Show."

As anyone who watches the news these days knows, the very future of "The Tonight Show," now hosted by Conan O'Brien, is at stake.

But I have a question: Why hasn't anyone mentioned why "The Jay Leno Show" didn't work (and is cancelled as of February)? All I have heard is that local NBC affiliates are in revolt because their advertisers are fleeing due to the low ratings of "The Jay Leno Show" as a lead in to the local news. Why are the ratings low in the first place? Why is everyone afraid to say that the emperor has no clothes? That the show doesn't work? OK, I did hear one commentator intimate that middle America, where "The Jay Leno Show" airs an hour earlier, doesn't understand Jay Leno's comedy. I wonder if this condescending person still has a job. The fact is, middle America does get Jay Leno's comedy (and Conan O'Brien's too) and has chosen to switch the channel. I think "The Jay Leno Show" is boring, repetitive and a bit desperate to fill in the time with as little effort as possible.

One could argue that the saturation level for adolescent humor and double entendre's has been reached. Or one could argue that the American viewing public likes dramatic stories rather than relatively inexpensive, contrived entertainment. Another argument could be made that the format of "The Jay Leno Show" is a wash; it promised to be a variety show, but it was a minimalist variation on the theme.

The biggest argument about the comedy crisis is to be found among the creative community here in Hollywood. I spoke with an actor, currently on a primetime drama, who decried the fact that "The Jay Leno Show" meant the unemployment of hundreds who would be involved in a dramatic series. This person felt strongly that Jay Leno could afford to retire and let others work. If Leno would step aside, fresh creativity would have a chance. The network could spend Leno's salary on development.

Two producers I know agreed. With so many reality shows trying to fill primetime network dramatic timeslots with effortless attempts at entertainment, they know the futures of their careers are at risk.

The thing is, why didn't NBC ask me? I would have told them that they should try "The Jay Leno Show" once a week and finesse it if needed. If the show was really good, they could expand it. It's only good sense! Instead, they made a really big and expensive gamble that continues to fizzle as we speak.

One key element is justice. Conan O'Brian's response [2] to NBC's proposal that "The Jay Leno Show" run at 11:35 p.m. and that "The Tonight Show" follow at 12:05 a.m., is classy and sad. O'Brien's avowal was addressed to "People of Earth." He notes that such a change to a 60-year television franchise would be the death of the show. NBC made a contract with Conan O'Brien; they should honor it (and I am not really a fan of O'Brien; it's the principle of the matter). In so doing they might have to take a real chance on talent and fresh voices and spend our money well. If NBC can trample or slither out of their contract to Conan, what does this say about their integrity? Even if they pay him to leave, it is just not good enough. (You know who will have the last laugh, right?)

And they wonder why our remote controls are like pinwheels. Frankly, I am encouraged that people have the good sense to change the channel when they don't like a program; it means they are thinking.

If television shows are genuine and good, audiences will pay attention. NBC ought to trust the audience more. We get it. After all, the future of television executives depends on the audience. Why? Because we buy the products that are advertised and the advertisers pay for television time that pays for production. Ultimately it is we, the audience, who pay for the show. We have demonstrated that we don't want to pay for "The Jay Leno Show" anymore. If we don't buy the products and lifestyles advertised, there is no network television. The shows are not brought to us by a product; we are brought to the product by the television show.

Comedy and the television industry are in crisis.

Hundreds of thousands of people are dead, dying or suffering in Haiti. We are fighting two wars (that we know of). Our government is struggling with healthcare reform. Homelessness, poverty ? and the list of things we actually do care about goes on and on.

At the end of the day (or the night) the big question about this late night television kerfuffle remains, and this comes from someone who enjoys a lot that television has to offer: who cares?

Change the channel.

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